

Still Life

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We live a few hundred yards from a drive-in theater at the end of a dead end street on the edge of a small Virginia town called Spotsylvania that people only pass through on their way to someplace else. Most people living here commute to DC or Richmond for work, but it's too far out to be considered a suburb, just a patch of people between cities that you wouldn't notice unless you stopped. There's a bowling alley, courthouse, high school and strip mall. Beyond the dead end, at the edge of the drive-in grass, is an unadorned Civil War battlefield where at some point a 'Near Here' sign may have stood to let you know something significant had happened there once where last year Monica and I picked strawberries with bleeding fingers before taking them back to the kitchen and soaking them in sugarwater for shortcake. We came here a year ago because Monica's father was sick and she wanted to take care of him. He died after a month, but we're still here.

The drive-in's been there forever from what I hear, and late on weekend nights, still runs movies that never made it to real screens. Some nights, when Monica's sleeping and I'm still awake, thinking about things, I'll sit on our porch and look out towards the screen. You can't see it clearly from this far away, but you can tell things are happening by the way the light reflects off the trees, changing the leaves from dark green to red or blue and whitening the trunks. Sometimes I try to make up the story in my head to correspond with

the flickering light. Before Monica's father died, we used to watch the movies sometimes from the edge of the trees; we'd take wine and sandwiches and make it into a late-night picnic. Once we snuck in and threw down a blanket right in front of the screen and looked up hard so the actors were as tall as buildings and our necks were sore for days. It's strange how the picture can be even more distorted up close, and you have to back away to get a decent perspective.

Monica's sleeping with her head on my shoulder, mumbling a little in sleeping Spanish. It's a small room, with just the bed, TV, and a couple of dressers. Three of her paintings hang on the walls: a flamingo, parrot, and peacock. She likes to paint birds, always in unusual colors or patterns: plaid doves, polka-dot robins, argyle cockatiels. Monica wakes up and looks around with heavy lids over unfocused eyes, then kisses my shoulder.

"I'm going to take a shower," she says, and with her accent it's 'tek a chower.' She pulls herself from the bed and half stumbles toward the bathroom with eyelids almost closed.

I get up and go into the kitchen for a beer. On the way back I hear the shower going and the bathroom door is partly open. I stop, nudge the door open a little more but not enough so she'll feel the cold air, and lean against the door jam, watching Monica.

The sliding shower door is textured, so it distorts her image. I like watching her like this, when she doesn't know I'm there and I can just look at her, removed, not taking part in the scene. I watch her shape move, her hand soaping her arm and shoulder. Sometimes she lets the water run over her head and I can see the soap glide down her back and her hair press flat against her skin. The closer to the

door she gets, the sharper she comes into view through the dimples in the glass, so she comes in waves, then fades into a blurred distortion of a person. When she backs away from the door and towards the far shower wall, it could almost be anybody.

The shower goes off and I quickly go lie back down on the bed. I turn on the TV and there's a black-and-white romance where the men wear hats and the women are blurred around the edges during close-ups. The guy is leaving and the woman doesn't want him to go. She has great glowing beads of tears in her eye, and her cheeks and hair are shining. He has a hard, set jaw, tired eyes and thin lips, and looks like he's seen a few things in his lifetime. Even though it's worn, it's a face I wouldn't mind having someday, a look that says I've been around and done some living. It's a face a man can respect.

Monica comes into the room with mean eyes. She's standing in the doorway in a t-shirt with one hand on her hip and the other in the air, thumb and finger pinched together, framed in the steam from the shower. Her long hair looks dumped on her head from a bucket. "What's this?" she says. I can't see what's in her hand so she marches up to the bed. "Do you see?" she says. "What is this?"

"What," I say. I'm defensive, but about what I don't know.

"A hair," she says. "A blonde hair. Who is this from?"

This has happened before. Last time she said there were footprints on the inside of the window of the car and she decided I'd been with an ex in the backseat. It took me hours to scrape off and hose down the paint she'd dumped all over the glass.

I used to argue with her, try to reason, but it never really seemed to do any good. It's like she gets convinced of her own story, decides

that something means something and that's that, there's no other explanation. Depending on her mood, a comment on the weather could be a personal attack.

"A blonde hair," she says again, holding her hand right in front of my face, but I still can't see what she means. Water drips down her arm and hangs at her elbow. "You've been with a woman, in my shower," and the last three words are resonant and slow like the chimes on a church tower clock.

"Are you going to tell me about it?" she says. I know that there's nothing I can say that would calm her down. "Well," she says, waiting.

"Monica," I say.

"Don't say anything," she says, "I know." Then: "you or me?"

"What," I ask her.

"Which one is leaving? You or me."

"Look," I say.

"Fine," she says, and turns. She walks hard on her heels to the closet leaving water footprints on the hardwood floor. She starts ripping shirts off hangers and piling them on the bed.

"Stop that," I tell her.

"Fine. You leave," she says. I stand not knowing what to do. I just want to forget all this and both lay down to watch the movie, put her back where she was when she was sleeping.

"Look," I say, "this doesn't make any sense."

"I don't care about sense!" she screams, and I feel like I'm staring at a lit pack of matches. "Just leave!" To help make her point she picks up a shoe, a black pump with a cracked heel, and winds up. It glances off my ear and hits the wall.

"In my shower? How could you?" she says. I pick up the shoe and

think hard. Finally I just grip it tight, turn and leave, pulling the door with the bars closed behind me. On the step I feel like I've just gotten off an elevator.

Outside it's getting dark, and smells like it might rain. I stand in our yard, intermittent patches of grass about ten square feet between the house and the sidewalk. I look down and realize I still have Monica's shoe, but don't know where to put it down, so I hold on to it. I feel disorganized, unsure, like someone's rearranged my head.

Lately, at night when I can't sleep, I've thought about how great it would be to just walk out the front door and keep walking. I bet I could walk for a long time. Maybe I could scrape up the price of a bus ticket and just go somewhere I've never been, with no luggage, open to what life hands me. I think about things like that a lot: how life changes with each decision, no matter how small, even when you don't even realize the significance. What if I hadn't gone out the night I met Monica, or what if her father had never gotten sick? Or maybe if I hadn't gone along with moving here. I often wonder if there are alternate realities where all these other choices are lived out. I wonder what I'm doing in those other realities, and whether I'm still with Monica.

There's a pink stucco house across the street with a couple that argues a lot. We can hear it from our bedroom some nights: not the words, but the yelling, then staccato slaps and sobbing. The cops come around every month or so. Next to them is where Frank lives. I can see a light on through his living room window. Not knowing what else to do, I cross the street and knock on his screen door.

Frank's sitting on the couch. He motions me inside without getting up. His living room has paneling and a boxy green couch with an

overturned crate for a coffee table. A Redskins pennant hangs on the wall over a plastic fern sitting in the far corner. Frank is on the couch with a glass of bourbon and a couple of ice cubes. He's dressed in faded jeans and a dark blue denim shirt, unbuttoned over a t-shirt. He's in his early forties, and his face is tanned and wrinkled around his glasses like a balled up paper bag. Sometimes we shoot pool on weekends, and I've watched a few games at his place.

He looks at the shoe, then asks me if I want a drink.

"Sure."

He gets a glass from the kitchen, puts in some ice, and pours it nearly full from the head of Abraham Lincoln. Frank has dozens of designer ceramic liquor bottles. A Model T once filled with gin, a vodka bust of Marilyn Monroe, whiskey inside W.C. Fields. They've been his passion.

I tell him I had an argument with Monica as I take the drink.

"Sorry to hear that," he says. He sits next to me on the couch while I drink my drink. I'm feeling safer, more settled. I think about telling him I'm thinking of leaving Monica. I want to ask him his advice, but I'd hate to dump all that on him. Besides, I'm not sure what kind of advice he could offer.

Frank's fiancée Rita left him four months ago for a computer programmer she'd met through her office in DC. That's where they first met, when Frank was doing some contract work up there. His company puts in floors: tile, linoleum, you name it. She's some sort of Internet designer, originally from Baltimore. They'd been together three years, same as us, and were going to get married in the spring. Frank was trying to get us to make it a double wedding.

Rita was nice, although I never got to know her well. When I

was over, she was either gone or doing some work in her room, but the way Frank watched her walk though the room to get a drink or look in the oven, I thought they'd never split. After a while I'd see her leaving in the morning for work looking more and more like a woman who doesn't have time to waste. Maybe a month before she left, she cut her hair short and started dressing in suits. Frank found a note on the kitchen table one afternoon when he got home from the warehouse where he works: he puts in floors all over the place, tile, linoleum, you name it. "I'm leaving," the note said. "I'm sorry. There's a pound of ground beef in the fridge that needs to be eaten before it goes bad." Sometimes, after a long night of drinking, Frank'll show me that note. The ink has run over time, and it's hard to make all the words out.

Frank takes a joint out of his breast pocket, lights it, and hands it to me. I take a long drag and pass it back. We hand it back and forth.

He's set Rita's old computer on top of the television. The TV was off, but there's a picture on the computer screen in a slight haze of green. I looked hard and made out what seems to be a kitchen.

"This site is from a girl named Doris," he says. "Webcam."

I'd never seen one of these, although I'd heard about them in the news. I look harder at the screen. Someone's just walked into the room. I can't really make her out very well, but I can tell she isn't fat and wears a sleeveless shirt and jeans. And she's barefoot.

"So this is what you've been doing," I say, more a statement than a question.

"Sometimes," he says, without embarrassment. "I'd heard about these things a couple of months ago. Just thought I'd check one out," he says. "I think it's better than television."

The girl looks into the fridge like she's skimming a book, not really searching for anything in particular. When she moves, sometimes the picture gets stuck and then jumps ahead, like stop-motion photography.

"It's the connection," Frank says when I ask. "It's just a modem. I need to get cable."

"I didn't know you were into this stuff. Computers."

"Never was," he says between sips from his glass. "But I got a lot of time on my hands, and this computer was just sitting in the bedroom for a while. Figured I'd learn how to use it."

"Might as well," I say.

"Right. Besides, it's good to try something new once in a while, you know?"

"I guess," I say.

"Plain old TV gets old," he says. "Too predictable."

The girl, Doris, has a loaf of bread open on the kitchen table, with some mayo and mustard, cheese, and some sort of deli slices. She starts making the sandwich in that start-stop motion, like waves of pictures, or a picture story watched by slowly flipping through a deck of cards.

"Looks like baloney," Frank says.

"Yeah," I tell him.

There's no sound coming from the computer, and after a few minutes, I can hear the faucet in Frank's kitchen slowly dripping. We keep watching Doris.

"How much does this cost?"

Frank shrugs without moving his eyes from the screen. "Depends. They're all different." I nod and drink.

"The more involved ones are more expensive," he says.

"Like what."

"You know. The harder ones. Chicks with toys. Boyfriends visiting. Sometimes even other girls or parties. They're okay, but they seem sort of fake. I like these better. The simple ones. The everyday life."

I wonder what Monica's doing now, and I wonder if we'll be able to talk when I get home. I close my eyes and can see her tearing up our sheets with a knife, pulling stuffing out of the pillow till the bedroom's filled with feathers, floating like small clouds. Or maybe she's ripped the door off the shower because that's where she found that damn hair. Her hair that gets lighter in summer.

Doris pours a glass of milk and takes a bite from her sandwich. She's standing in front of the fridge, reading notes and lists that have been stuck to the door with magnets.

"I can't believe she's eating standing up," Frank says. "I hate that."

"Eating while standing?" I say.

"It's bad for digestion," he explains. "Rushing through a meal like that. Should take your time." Frank crosses one foot over his knee.

"I like cutting them in half myself. Sandwiches," I say.

We watch some more. Doris pours another glass of milk.

"I'm getting hungry," Frank says. "Want something?"

"No thanks," I tell him. He lays the dead end of the joint in an ashtray on the crate and goes into the kitchen.

I watch the screen until I'm done with my drink. I'm surprised to find myself fascinated. Although it should be intensely boring, watching Doris eat her sandwich, I'm connecting with her.

"This is really weird," I say.

"What," he says.

"Just watching this girl doing this. Watching her eat."

"Yeah," he says from the kitchen. "But that's just it."

"What is," I say as he comes back from the kitchen with a sandwich on a paper plate.

"The details," he says. "The little things." He sets the plate down and refills both our glasses, then caps the bottle and takes a bite from the sandwich. "You really get to know these girls." He looks at me, sees my expression, then continues. "No, I'm not crazy, okay? I know that I'm not going to meet these girls in real life. And I don't get on those online sites where you can e-mail them or anything. But the thing is," and he takes another bite of his sandwich then talks around the food in his mouth, "thing is, I feel, I don't know, like I know them intimately. Know what I mean?" I don't say anything. "It's all those little things. Eating a sandwich, brushing her teeth, whatever, it's like I'm invited into her life behind closed doors. And in a way," and now he sounds conspiratorial, "I get to know them like they really are." He has the sandwich suspended between us, pointing it at me. "Probably even better than their dates. You know?"

I get what he means, but I don't really want to think about it. I think about how much Monica loves a new jar of peanut butter, sometimes just eating it right out of the jar with a fork or a spoon as soon as we get home from the store, before anything's even put away.

Frank chews, then sounds like he's moaning a little at how good his sandwich is. I look over and he notices me looking at him.

"Good sandwich?" I say.

He nods. "Sometimes I like doing what they do on the screen."

"Really," I say.

"Yeah, you know. If she eats a sandwich, I eat a sandwich. Or if

she gets on the phone, sometimes I pick it up. Makes me feel, I don't know, closer to her."

I don't like picturing Frank holding a phone up to his ear watching Doris on the phone. And I don't even want to imagine that he talks to her, or anything at all about the 'harder' sites.

I find I'm tapping Monica's shoe on my knee, and might have been doing it for some time. Doris stands by the window in her kitchen, looking out into what must be her backyard.

"The great thing about this, what I like most, is that it never ends."

"What doesn't end?"

"Anything. I mean, you don't know what's going to happen, but you know there's no script. No one's going to die. No forced jokes. No – well, no plot. No storyline. These are just regular people."

"Regular people with cameras in their rooms."

"Well, yeah," he says, nodding. "But it's real. The things she does, it's what really happens. She'll go to bed tonight and get up tomorrow and it'll be the same, but a little different." He's talking as if this is very important, like he has an audience. "It's just the things that make up her life," he says, then takes another sip from his glass. Doris leaves the kitchen, and the image suddenly shifts to another room. The haze is almost completely dark green, and I can't make it out until a light is flipped on and I see we're in Doris' bathroom, where the light screams off the tiles.

"Here we go," Frank says, and stops chewing.

I can see Doris better now. Her shirt is red, and she looks a little younger than I thought, maybe late teens. She has straight brown hair that's cut at her shoulders. The camera appears to be just over the mirror above the sink, and I can see her face clearly when she leans

into the mirror. She pushed up one cheek, brushes her hair behind her ear with a finger, then examines something on the edge of her mouth.

"Man," Frank says, exhaling.

Apparently, she's satisfied with her reflection, and turns, unzips her pants and pushes them down towards her ankles, then sits on the toilet. The dripping faucet in Frank's kitchen seems louder. A line has been crossed, and I start feeling strange.

"I think this is about it for me," I say. Frank doesn't hear me. I finish my drink in one big mouthful. "I'm gonna go," I say. Frank looks up, surprised, then back at the screen.

"Okay," he says. "Give my best to Monica."

I put the drink on the crate and walk to the door, then turn once more and look at him watching a girl's life on the screen. His foot is across his knee again, and he holds the glass hanging in the air, halfway to his mouth. He doesn't seem to be breathing.

I shut the door behind me and stand on his porch for a minute, feeling unsettled and a little guilty, then annoyed that I feel guilty. I forgot what it's like to mix drinks with a joint. My body's trying to catch up to my head, and my head isn't straight.

I try to figure out what to do. I'd like to just go back into my house and start the night over again, but I know that won't happen. Monica's mood probably hasn't changed and I'm not ready to face that yet, but I still feel a little lost, like a dog that's dragging a leash around and doesn't know where to go. I need a tune-up. I need to sit down and think hard about what I want to do in the bigger picture. Reexamine things. Soon. But the image of Doris pops up again in my head; her eating a sandwich and talking a slow drink of milk, looking

at the fridge, natural. Absently tucking her hair behind her ear with one finger.

I realize my eyes feel dry, and I haven't blinked in some time. I may've been standing on this porch forever. Doris' jeans were frayed, and white threads stretched across her left knee.

It's just starting to rain. This street is almost at sea level, and during the wet season the front yard floods and water gets up to our porch. The first time it happened, I dreamt that night that our house floated away and hit the river. We spun for a while in the white-water rapids, so I roped a steamboat and we towed along, sitting on the porch drinking champagne.

I walk into the light rain and down the street, then cut around the last house and head towards the trees. My shirt is sticking to my back from the rain and my heels keep falling short of where I'm trying to put them, so I try to keep my eyes perfectly level with the horizon for balance. I don't know where I'm going, exactly, but I just want to keep moving, even a little bit at a time.

The road ends at the edge of grass marking the half of the battlefield still there. I walk out into the middle of it, feeling my hair getting damp and smelling the wet grass. Walking out here like this, I feel like I'm the only person in the world. It's always strange here in this battlefield; I know it's haunted, but I can't feel the ghosts, so many people who died while running across the ground or sitting behind a fallen tree, unknown to those just a mile away hanging wet clothes across a rope to dry or running a hoe through the hard ground next to the house. Guys who probably weren't even born here and definitely never planned on dying here, just passing through until they ran into a bullet. I try to picture that, try to imagine some soldier

in worn shoes and torn clothes and an unshaven face with a rifle in his hand, bleeding into the ground next to me, looking up at me asking for help, but it all fades quickly, and I can't force the image to be real no matter how hard I try. I can't soak the memory from the ground because it was such a different world where people did significant things like getting killed in the tall grass in this field while fighting for something with a picture of a girl inside his coat, next to his chest, the image fading over time.

I come to think that maybe I'm done with this town. Maybe we should go someplace else; we've done our time here. I want something new, to start over in a place that has apartment buildings or an airport or even a train station. A place where people are supposed to stay. I think we can do that. I think that if we stay where we are, we might die and rot.

It's something I realize without stopping; I keep walking across the field towards the fence on the edge of the drive-in parking lot, thinking about getting out of here, what we'd be wearing even, how it'd feel seeing mile markers pass by. There's a hole in the fence that kids sneak through, the same one that Monica and I used to crouch down and sneak through with wine bottles and maybe a picnic basket. I get through and sit down just inside the fence. A movie is playing but I can't hear any sound. The parking lot's nearly deserted, just two cars sitting next to speaker posts, and I wonder how this place can keep going. I look in the front of one car but can't make out separate shapes, just one dark mass of a couple melting together and occasional movement around the edges of the image. I wonder what their lives are like and what they'll be like down the road, after school, with jobs and maybe families, or if they're just caught up in the moment, this

brief instant of excitement, making out at a drive-in like that's exactly what they're supposed to be doing right now in their lives.

I wonder what Monica's doing now and what it's going to take for her to leave here. I'm not looking forward to it.

I don't know the movie that's playing. A redhead in a skirt and a guy in a ripped shirt are running through a tunnel from something that's only shown as a big shadow on the walls. I keep watching, waiting to see if they get out, but I remember that it's a lousy b-movie and whoever was supposed to die has probably already died by now, so whatever conflict they went through in back of that tunnel brought them together and now they'll be fine and happy together because that's how all these movies go. I used to like these movies more than I do now. I guess I got tired of the old patterns and how the hero and heroine always come together because they overcome some huge obstacle that looks impossible to overcome or they come close to dying but make it out in the end with barely a scratch. I used to think that was all funny, but now I think it's just old. Maybe that's why we don't come down here much anymore, don't sneak in with wine or a picnic basket like we're doing something wrong.

I stand up, and my feet make a sucking sound in the mud. I'm still holding Monica's shoe. I lean back and throw it hard at the picture on the screen without really planning to. I want it to hit the canvas and get stuck. I follow the path of the shoe, see it arc just a few feet in the air, then fall back to the ground, and I don't even hear it hit. I stand there for a minute, images on the screen moving in a blur now through the rain that comes down harder.

Suddenly I want the skies to just open up and dump all the water down, wash everything away in a flood, push everyone down the

streets and into rivers then to the sea so that everything can start all over again. I think maybe Monica's probably asleep, whispering in Spanish, and I wish I were with her, dry beneath the covers. Or maybe we could leave tonight; just pack up the car with a couple of suitcases and her canvases in the trunk, take a picture of this place in a rear view mirror. I can get a job anywhere painting houses. Maybe she can even do something with her paintings, or find some office work somewhere. Anything.

I think about the skin behind Monica's ear, beneath her hair, how soft it is, and how she eats chips in small, quick bites. I think how things are better when they're simple and how small things can make a life. Then I wipe the rain from my face and start walking towards home.

After what seems like an hour of scratching I finally get the key in the lock. I try to open the door, but the chain is on. I call out her name and knock louder, sandwiched between the doors. I finally hear the chain pulled back so I open the door and see her walking back into the bathroom. I walk to it, dripping water across the floor, and knock softly.

"It's open," I hear her say.

I push on the door and walk in. The lights are off and candles are lit on the rim of the tub. There's a tarp on the floor, covering the tiles, and the room's heavy with the sharp metallic smell of fresh paint. Then I see that the bathroom is gone: she's painted the walls away. The ceiling is in blue and black and the sun has just set behind what once was the sink. Along one wall, waist-high, is a line of dying

fire, and the stars on the ceiling seem to get brighter. There's a shooting star by the fan vent. It's all so sharp and clear, and as I stand in the middle of the scene, I can almost feel a breeze.

She shuts the door and faces me. The skyline on the back of the door is fading to dark, and small points of light are just coming out beneath the place where a hook that hung towels used to be. Everything's changed. It's like she's taken away all the old walls and made the room into a whole new place.

I look back at her and smile. Her hands and shirt are covered with paint, and a streak of red runs down her cheek. She touches my face and I can feel a color, cold but soft and wet. I can hear her breathe. My hands rest on her hips, and her arms go round my neck, and it feels like it hasn't felt in a very long time.

"We should go soon," I tell her. She nods and leans her head into my chest, and her arms squeeze a little tighter.

But just for this moment I want to be exactly where I am. We don't say anything else for a long time. We stand there just like that, and we weave a little when I hold her tight. ▢